

WASHINGTON— U.S. Rep. Harry E. Mitchell said today that the news that 22,000 veterans have sought help from a suicide hotline in its first year, and that 1,221 suicides have been averted, demonstrates the Department of Veterans' Affairs' pilot suicide hotline public awareness campaign should be expanded to a national level. [Source: "Suicide Hotline Got Calls from 22,000 veterans," The Associated Press, July 28, 2008]

"Today's news shows that the more we reach out to veterans, the more likely they are to reach back and get help," said Mitchell. "We have a grave and growing problem, and we have a responsibility to let veterans know there they can call for help."

Mitchell said that he is pleased the VA recently abolished its long-standing prohibition on television advertising by launching a pilot public awareness campaign in Washington, D.C.

"The need for this is clear, and I hope this program will be taken nationwide soon," said Mitchell. "We can't just wait for veterans to come to us; we need to bring the VA to our veterans."

Mitchell serves as chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and

Investigations, which examined the issue of veteran suicides in a July 15 hearing. During that hearing, the VA announced the launch of a three-month pilot veteran's suicide hotline public awareness campaign.

The campaign, which launched last week, consists of more than 300 ads on D.C. Metro trains and buses. The pilot program also features 12 ads in D.C. Metro stations and a television public service announcement. The VA suicide hotline is (800) 273-TALK. [Source: "VA to Test Public Service Ads," CBS News, July 14, 2008]

VA Reverses Policy, Lifts Ban on Television Advertising

In June, VA Secretary James Peake personally notified Mitchell of his decision to reverse VA policy and lift the long-standing self-imposed ban on television advertising in order to improve outreach to service men and women who suffer from mental health disorders when returning from war.

Peake's decision followed months of questions by Mitchell about VA efforts to reach veterans who may be at risk for suicide and have not already sought assistance from the VA. Out of a veteran population of about 25 million – only 7.8 million are enrolled to receive health care services from the VA. 5.5 million veterans were actually treated by the VA last year.

In May, Peake publicly apologized to Mitchell for the VA's failure to produce documents requested by Mitchell relating to the VA's efforts to conduct outreach to veterans at risk for suicide. In April, after months of failing to respond to Mitchell's document request, the VA told Mitchell to "go file a freedom of information act request." [Source: "VA Blasted Over Veteran Suicides," CNN, May 6, 2008; The Associated Press, May 6, 2008]

In response to a threat by Mitchell to pursue a subpoena, the VA began producing documents on May 9.

On June 4, Mitchell and Rep. Ginny Brown-Waite (R-Fla.) asked the Committee to examine the VA's prohibition on TV advertising as a means to conduct outreach to veterans at risk for suicide. Brown-Waite is Ranking Republican Member of the House Subcommittee Mitchell chairs.

Citing conflicting statements by VA officials about whether the VA had the authority to make use of TV advertising, Mitchell and Brown-Waite asked, in a letter to Chairman Bob Filner and Ranking Member Steve Buyer, "that the full Committee use its resources to explore the potential efficacy of a broadcast public awareness campaign as a means of conducting outreach to veterans at risk for suicide.